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Depending on the Public Bath:
A Trip from New Orleans to Kyoto

A year after the storm the military police were still new and strange, and before the violence to follow, there was a hush. The city was silent because it was horrified – bereft of the sound of engines, the sound of industry. Our cars had flooded, there were no gas stations, the streets were collapsing under two weeks of tons and tons of water sitting and seeping and sitting and seeping. So we found ourselves walking, and where there was no electricity we relied on our front porches and daylight. We had been told that 1/32 part bleach would make the tap water approximately potable. Beneath our feet a network of terra cotta pipes burst under the weight of the saturated ground, releasing millions of gallons of water weekly, soaking more ground, and bursting more pipes – mixing sewage and drinking water together. In our minds every glass of water exploding with the seeds of cholera, typhoid, dysentery, waiting to be drunk so they could blossom in our bodies. And oh, the gutting and demolishing and decomposition and all of the things that landed on our skin, all of the things that we inhaled ...

This was before city government returned only to fall apart, before anyone had mentioned schools, hospitals, public housing. And we were still outside most of the time, taking advantage of the daylight, hugging near strangers. (How did you make out? {Lost everything.} {I'm thankful for everything, but I hate Houston.}) Hug hug hug, cry cry cry, drink drink drink

Amid all of this I encountered Mark: a friend of a friend whom I'd met two years earlier. We had been strangers then, we were still strangers now. I'm planning on traveling, he'd said. I'm planning on traveling too, I'd said. Where are you going? he'd asked. I was considering Istanbul, I'd replied. And you? Kyoto, he'd answered. Would you like to travel together? Yes.

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Me: Why is the work of Lafcadio Hearn is so important to you?

Mark: I think because while he lived here he was akin to our version of Mark Twain or Ambrose Bierce or so. Not in terms of quality, but of the same era and styling: some poet-newspaper man, half tenderness, half street-wisdom. And when Hearn was here (1870s) we were perhaps at our wildest. The south deep in reconstruction, we were already a city of immigrants and free blacks, our port was vibrant – there were longshoremen and stevedores everywhere it was a very colorful, lawless and essential period for us. He'd been sent here by a newspaper in Cincinnati to cover New Orleans and ended up staying for ten years. Then he was sent to Japan.

Me: And in Japan?

Mark: He interpreted a great deal of Japan for America, much in the same way that he'd interpreted New Orleans for America. I doubt that Hearn thought of it this way, but I certainly think of it this way: that to him, Japan was our antidote. Serene while we were violent, insular while we were extroverted...

Me (aside): I think that this is ridiculously simple.

Mark: Of course it's overly simple.

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I'm looking back at the photos I have of Kyoto and they strike me as profoundly uninteresting. Or rather, photos that I can't necessarily share with others because they would find them profoundly uninteresting. They are more or less pictures of very odd architecture and very small things; that is, entire buildings crammed into alleyways, a storefront exclusively dedicated to the sale of door handles. I had just come from a place wiped clean of such minutiae, these mysterious quirks and anomalous urban growths. A few I can clearly remember taking; I remember that each time I thought to myself, "this is really important. This is a really important picture to take." Very few of them are of tourist sites. The most important, perhaps, is a photo of a building hidden by the huge and complex fire escape attached to its face. And on the fourth story, standing on its own

custom made platform, a plastic palm tree directly in front of that floor's only window. This quiet and absurd moment – this was what was worth keeping.

In post-Katrina New Orleans cars regularly smash into street signals, pedestrians, and storefronts in some study-worthy illustration of traffic Darwinism, the lost streetlights leaving intersections open to more anarchy and collision. I can hear myself back then (it sounds much as when I still say it today): cycle and rail will save us.

From the moment we touched down at Narita, our route was seven hours of tram to tram to train (conventional) to train (bullet) to taxi to the empty street. I have never seen so many uniforms and official hats in my life. On the bullet train I remember the force of momentum against my organs more clearly than anything, focusing on the farthest thing on the horizon to quell motion sickness from trying to read the near landscape. In between passing out from exhaustion and trying hard not to vomit, I was elated. This was light rail, complete with snack carts and clear station announcements. This was the best of what civilization had to offer.

We had met Ben and Rebecca at the hostel. Both of them had been to Kyoto four times in the past three years. They agreed to take us to Gion. After a week, temples and shrines had begun to blur a little in our minds, in a manner similar to European church fatigue. Gion was different. It was a functioning neighborhood, complete with geiko and machiya and ochaya, and nightlife as it has been since Japan's middle ages. We were struck by the absolute historicalness of it, struck by the woodenness, the preservation of detail down to every delicate hinge and fastener. It was a living museum, petrified: horrible and beautiful at the same time. (“Look down Shinbashi-dori at exactly the perfect angle and you can block out all of the modern buildings in the background.”) I asked Ben why he seemed to begrudge the Gion district. He said simply because it was like a playground for the rich, a place where people pay a great deal of money to be nostalgic. He called it a humongous and expensive forgetting of modern life. I asked Ben why he'd come to visit so often then. He said he'd come to ride the trains.

We were in the Very Berry Café, sitting on La-Z-Boys, eating noodles, looking out of the back of the restaurant and onto the rock garden. Beside us, a coffee table made out of sea-shells suspended in clear resin. Behind us the rest of the establishment, whose seaside/surfer/Christmas theme was so delightfully and so intensely kitschy that one should not behold it all at once, hence our facing the rock garden. Perhaps most noticeable was that the entire rear of the building was made of removable sliding glass doors. I could not conceive of this invisible boundary, of the grandly functioning social contract at work behind this wall constructed entirely of glass doors.

Me: Describe to me the book you're reading.

Mark: It's *Temple of the Golden Pavilion*.

Me: Yes, but describe it to me.

Mark: It's about a monk who burns down Kinkaku-ji. It really happened. The golden pavilion today is only fifty years old.

Me: Why did he do it?

Mark: In the book he's obsessed with beauty, and his burning the temple is about disappointment with beauty on some level.

Me: And in real life, do you think that the monk felt this way?

Mark: No, in real life, I think that it was about the degradation of something holy. I think that it was about commodification of something indigenous and sacred. For the sake of tourism.

We'd taken two buses to get to Kinkaku-ji. We could only see it from a distance, over a section of the pond on which it stands. We were prohibited from standing any closer; this was, I suppose, to prevent a second arson. Do you think that it's done partially to re-inject an air of mystery? I asked. So that we can't call its bluff, stand right next to it and say, "ah, yes, a replica. It's only fifty years old."

There is little left of historical Japan. We discovered this while traveling through Tokyo and Osaka. Everything is late twentieth century. Everything. The story goes: Kyoto was a candidate target for the American atomic bomb, but was spared because of its beauty. Other sources claim that a particular diplomat had honeymooned there and made sure that

it was spared because it held sentimental value for him. So Hiroshima or Nagasaki was chosen instead, and Kyoto has the largest concentration of ancient buildings of any city in Japan. All of those specimen of pre-war Japan in the hands of one city. What an awful responsibility.

Mark: I wrote a letter to the U.N. a few weeks ago.

Me: Yes?

Mark: Yes. I was asking about UNESCO status. I proposed that we should be allowed to nominate New Orleans as a world heritage site.

Me: And their response?

Mark: That it would be impossible and that essentially every property-owner in the city would have to agree to be the guardian or groundskeeper of a world heritage site.

Me: –

Mark: No one wants to live in a museum. No one should live that way, for the sake of others gawking.

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It would seem that I've lost my travel companion again. He has arisen before the crack of dawn, left me, to stalk the geishas.

Ben spent the afternoon recounting his love for Japan. (150 million people, mind you, half the population of the United States, crammed into an area 2/3 the size of California. That type of density must speak to a beautiful type of citizenship.) Eventually this morphed into an account of his intense love for the Shinkansen; the bullet train. And then the inevitable, “don't get me wrong – this sort of development isn't completely beautiful and perfect. It takes a great deal of space to run a rail line this fast. You can't just take a curve in a train that's traveling 200 kmh. Every curve is painfully gradual. The government has had to reclaim a lot of land to run these lines, to take these wide curves – usually farmland, frequently against the will of property owners. Those nasty cases of eminent domain that no one wants to hear about.”

The floors of Nijo castle chirp. This chirping is caused by a system of nails and clamps rubbing together beneath the floorboards. The castle itself is huge and dark. Its walls are covered in delicate paintings, and not uncommonly, there is almost no furniture anywhere. But there is chirping everywhere. There were a lot of visitors that day, so intrigued by the floors – nightingale floors they’re called – that they would shuffle along to maximize the chirping. This type of floor had been built as an alarm against approaching assassins. Surely we were wearing out the chirping system with all of our shuffling. Surely there was a lifespan to those nails and clamps. One day they would simply wear out and maybe be pointless.

On our last night, we returned to the hostel after dinner, expecting to go to bed early, to wake early, and to leave. I found Sayako in the women’s dormitory re-organizing her luggage. She introduced herself and invited me to go with her to the public bath. I hesitated. She pressed, “Why would you not?” Indeed, I thought, why would I not?

The bathhouse entrance looked like a cleared garage, lit all night and open to the public all night. Its walls lined with cabinets so old that their corners were worn round. The keys were three inch by three inch wooden blocks with rectangular teeth gouged out of one edge. Our backs to traffic, Sayako opened a locker, we put our shoes in, she kept only the unwieldy key.

Directly inside, striking brightness, and a woman who sat in an area much like a box office with a cash register and a mini-fridge, swiveling on her stool as she collected admission: men on the left, women on the right. From there we could hear but not see vigorous motion, splashing, people bathing but not speaking. Between the tall ceilings and short walls drifted steam, echo, the smell of cleanliness. Then there were more lockers and other women, all of us silently finishing an undressing that had begun on the street. We stuffed our clothes and giant wooden key into one of them, swapping for a smaller metal version on a string, which was the only thing Sayako wore around her wrist as we entered the bath.

The only talking was Sayako giving me direction. Twice we soaped down, twice we rinsed with bowls provided us. Faucets placed only a couple of feet from the ground

forced us to kneel. My first instinct was to look at the other women in the room, as if to seek eye contact or an introduction. No one met my gaze, all focused on washing; not for timidity, but because there was no rudeness in ignoring each other, and because it would have been more rude of me to distract them from the process of bathing. Still, though, even without acknowledging each other, there was an agreement among us. “You must wash twice,” Sayako informed me. At some point everyone had decided that washing twice would make you clean enough to participate in the communal bath.

Sayako asked me what my favorite site had been thus far. I’d not hesitated to answer the house of Kawai Kanjiro, the famous earthenware ceramicist. She’d asked why. I did not say that I was a little tired of grandeur. I did not say it because it would have never come out the way I’d intended, which is to say that what I missed most right then were human-sized spaces. This house had been obscure and functional. It had been heavy with a sense of daily life, which I had been missing too. Here there were tools and utility sinks, a kiln behind the house that was just as important as all of the shrines we’d seen before it.

The baths ranged: on the left, a cold bath, on the far right, the water was exceedingly hot and had been infused with herbs until it turned green. We would test all four, lingering in each, taking our time to acclimate to the next. Sayako had highlighted the importance of slow acclimation to avoid heart attack.

And there we were, jolly as two little cooking apples, such average and naked strangers in the middle of the night, uncoiled in a bath of tea.